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Presenter: Maj. Gen. J. B. Dutton, Commander Of Multinational Division Southeast; Moderator: Bryan Whitman, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs

**Friday, August 5, 2005 9:00 a.m.
EDT**

Defense Briefing by British Royal Marines

MR. WHITMAN: General Dutton, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me?

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Yes, I can. I'm just going to have to turn the volume down slightly this end, actually, please? Yeah. Try again. I think that will be better. Try again?

Hello? Yes, I can hear you. Can you hear me?

MR. WHITMAN: General Dutton? Can you hear me?

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Yes, I can hear you fine.

MR. WHITMAN: General Dutton, thank you. This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon, and welcome and thank you for joining us today. You have gathered here in the Pentagon Briefing Room several Pentagon correspondents, and I know that you can't see them, so we'll identify ourselves when we're talking to you.

But for our audience here in Washington, our briefer today is Major General Jim Dutton. He is the U.K. Royal Marine and commander, Multinational Division Southeast. General Dutton's command includes not only U.K. forces, but also troops from Italy, Australia, Japan, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal and Romania. These forces are responsible for the ongoing security operations in Southeastern Iraq, including the cities of Basra and An Nasiriyah. He's going to do as we typically do here today -- provide us with an operational kind of overview before we get into the questions.

I know that this is the first time that he's talked to you, and I can tell you from his bio he has a very distinguished military career. He has served in Northern Ireland, in the Falklands War. He has been in Southeast Asia. Perhaps one of his more dangerous assignments is when he was assigned here to the Pentagon -- but no, seriously. After the attacks of 9/11 he was detailed here, where he was the chief defense staff liaison officer to the chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, so he's not unfamiliar with the Pentagon. And so we welcome him back to the Pentagon by means of modern technology.

General, thank you for being with us, and I'll turn it over to you to open it up.

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Well, thank you very much. And good morning, everybody. If I could just say a few words, about MND Southeast to maybe set the scene. This area consists of four provinces -- Al Basra, Al Muthanna, Dhi Qar and Maysan. Overall, its approximate size is 110,000 square kilometers. But probably more meaningfully, that is an area slightly smaller than the state of Mississippi; and more meaningful to me, it's about half the size of the United Kingdom. It borders Iran in the east, Kuwait in the south and Saudi Arabia in the south. And the total length of border is 1,700 kilometers.

It's predominantly desert in the west and south, with marsh areas in the center and the east along the Iranian border. The region contains the only deepwater port for Iraq; that is, Umm Qasr. And of course very significantly, it contains the Rumaila oilfields, which is currently the main source of income for the country, on top of what is believed to be the second-largest oil reserves in the world.

The population is around 4-1/2 million; 70 percent Shi'a, about 17.5 percent Sunni, and 12.5 percent other religions. Unemployment is very high; 32 percent in Basra, 46 in Muthanna, 25 in Dhi Qar, and 34 in Maysan. So overall, about a third of the available workforce is unemployed.

As you heard at the beginning, the MND Southeast is a multinational division. It consists of just over 13,000 soldiers from U.K., Italy, Australia --

AUDIO BREAK

BRIEFING RESUMES

MR. WHITMAN: General Dutton, can you hear me? It's Bryan Whitman again.

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: I can hear you fine. Can you hear me?

MR. WHITMAN: I can hear you now. I apologize for that technical glitch, but even the miracles of modern technology come with fuses still, and we lost one, it looks like. And it's been replaced now.

We lost you at the point in which you were describing the composition of your organization and your coalition partners.

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Okay. I'll just start at it again.

It consists of over 13,000 soldiers from the U.K., Italy, Australia, Japan, Denmark, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal, the United States, Norway and Romania. We also have in this area the new Iraqi army division. This covers the four provinces. This is Ten Division, and it's commanded by Major General Latif. It's organized into four brigades and consists of about five-and-a-half thousand soldiers, and that's going to rise to 9,000 by June next year.

My mission is, of course, under the terms of UNSCR 1546, and it includes partnership with the Iraqi security forces and the civil authorities to neutralize anti-Iraqi forces; and in parallel, support the development of a robust, self-reliant and credible Iraqi security capability in order to allow the Iraqi government to defeat the insurgency.

In relative terms, this region is quiet and stable, as shown by the low level of incidents. We have down here between 14 and 18 security incidents per week. The Shi'a insurgency remains subdued whilst Muqtada al-Sadr pursues the political route to power.

However, there are rogue elements who will continue to perpetrate acts of violence throughout the AO,

largely out of frustration. There will also continue to be inter- and intra-tribal fighting in the Basra province as well as other acts of political and sectarian assassination and public disorder; the latter, the disorder, often caused by annoyance over the lack of a reliable electricity and water supply.

Roadside IEDs have killed five British soldiers in Maysan in the last three months. I'd say they are obviously a major concern. Nevertheless, because of this relatively benign environment, we have been able to forge ahead with the main effort, which is security sector reform. We're continuing to build on the existing partnership arrangements with the Iraqi army, the police, and the Department of Border Enforcement until they are capable of conducting operations successfully without our direct assistance.

I'm intending to use the security operations for the referendum and the elections processes as a means to enhance the capability and credibility of the ISF, as well as improving their standing within their own communities. It is their operation, and they have undertaken it successfully before -- last January. Our role is very much to support their joint planning, and we do this primarily through the Provincial Joint Operations Centers, the PJOCs.

I am confident that southeastern Iraq will continue to develop. There is a real enthusiasm here for the democratic process, and there was a very high turnout for the election in January '05. And once the country has a stable, long-term government in power at the end of this year, I feel sure that they will be able to begin to realize the benefits of their considerable natural resources. There is a long way to go, but there is no doubt that this country has the resources -- and the people have the natural talents and desire for improvement -- that should prove to be a winning combination.

And now I'm happy to take any questions you may have.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for that overview, and we'll get right into it.

Go ahead, Charlie.

Q General, Charles Aldinger with Reuters. You speak of the relatively benign atmosphere in the region, and you say between 14 and 18 incidents a week, generally. How does that compare with, say, a month ago and six months ago? In other words, albeit benign, is it increasing?

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: No, it's been pretty static. I've only been here for two months, but of course, I've been taking a close interest in what's going on here for a lot longer than that, and we have all the statistics available.

I would say it's been pretty static. There was a considerable Shi'a uprising 12 months ago, when the level of violence in this area was much higher. But ever since that was suppressed at the end of the summer last year, and Muqtada al-Sadr chose to take the political route to power, there have been a steady but relatively low level of incidents.

Q Do you or your people have any contact with al-Sadr on a regular basis? Is there any cooperation, or is he just -- is he devoting his time to Iraqi politics, so to speak?

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Yeah, we certainly have no military connection with Muqtada al-Sadr himself. There are local connections in the towns, certainly in Basra, between the diplomatic representation from the U.K. We have a British consul general in Basra, who reports to the ambassador in Baghdad. And there are certainly contacts between him and all political parties. But I have no military connections with the Sadr organization.

MR. WHITMAN: Bob?

Q General, this is Bob Burns of Associated Press. To what extent and in what ways are you seeing harmful or, for that matter, helpful Iranian involvement in southeastern Iraq?

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Well, the question of Iranian involvement is always a difficult one, because there's a lot of speculation about it and not many facts. There are -- there's clearly been relatively close relationships between the two countries over many years. The Maysan province, in particular, but also Basra province border Iran.

One of the problems that we have and that the Iraqis and indeed Iranians have is that there is only one legal border crossing between Iraq and Iran, between the Gulf and Baghdad. There is on the Maysan- Iran border no border crossing at all. And there are perfectly legitimate reasons for Iraqis to want to cross into Iran and Iranians to want to cross into Iraq, and of course it's difficult for people to do it if they know this border crossing is 2(00) or 300 kilometers away.

We do have a plan. The Iraqis have a plan, with the Iranians, to open up another crossing on the Maysan border. And I think the sooner we can do that, the better, because then there can be greater control.

It's difficult for me to say what effect Iranian influence has on individual Iraqis. Clearly they share the same religion. But my understanding of the Iraqis of southern Iraq is that they have a different view of politics and that very few of them would wish to have a similar political system as the Iranians do.

Q May I follow up, Bryan?

MR. WHITMAN: Yeah, go ahead, Bob.

Q General, it's Bob Burns again. Do you see evidence of Iranian weapons coming into Iraq?

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: I can't really answer your question specifically on weapons. We have seized -- and in fact we had a big seizure. I should give credit where it's due, actually. It was the Iraqi Department of Border Enforcement that made a big seizure of weapons about 10 days ago. This was near to Route 6, which runs up from Basra to al-Amarah, through the provinces of Basra and Maysan. We don't know exactly where that came from. We are keen to find out, and investigations are ongoing. There have been suggestions that they could have come from Iran, but I certainly can't prove that.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Jim.

Q General, it's Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. Are you preparing for a draw down of British forces in your sector? And if so, what are you doing about it? How is that likely to play out? And also, troops from other countries in your sector?

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Yes. I mean, I think as you well know, and I said in my opening statement and you will have heard from everybody else over here, from the top to the bottom, that the ultimate aim is for multinational forces to be able to so empower Iraqi security forces that we can leave this country and allow the Iraqis to take charge of their own destiny. So in those terms, in common with every other nation that's here, we are looking to draw down our forces and eventually to withdraw completely from this country.

When we do that is entirely conditions based, and we will do it when we judge that the Iraqi security forces are capable enough of taking charge. And that will be a joint decision, joint in every sense. It will be a coalition decision between ourselves, the U.S. and, of course, all the other partners down here, and a joint

decision in terms of the coalition and the Iraqis, because they're certainly going to have a vote in this and they will have a view of when they're capable of taking charge of their own security.

Clearly, we would like to do this as soon as possible, but I think there have been a lot of political statements recently on both sides of the Atlantic, which I would only reiterate, that this is conditions based and not time based.

Q Do you have a sense at this point how many -- you know, the size of the draw down when it does occur, what you're planning for in terms of the size of the draw down?

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Well, I mean, ultimately we're planning for a complete withdrawal of coalition forces from Iraq. I think it will inevitably be in stages because certain areas of the country will be able to take charge of their own security sooner than others. And I think we could reasonably safely say that, given the benign environment in the south that I've described, it is likely that at last some of the four provinces in the south are likely to be ready to be handed over to Iraqi security control before some of the more troublesome ones in the center, west and northwest. So clearly it will be something of a staged draw down.

MR. WHITMAN: Lisa?

Q Lisa Burgess from Stars and Stripes. General, can you discuss a little bit about the oil situation? Can you hear me, sir?

AUDIO BREAK

BRIEFING RESUMES

MR. WHITMAN: General, this is the Pentagon. Can you hear us?

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Yeah, I can. You're very faint, though. Can I get you to speak up slightly, so as I can hear you down the telephone.

MR. WHITMAN: Sure, we certainly will. And we really appreciate your patience. And we want to be respectful of your time, so perhaps we can just ask two or three more quick questions and let you get on your way.

Do you have time for that, sir?

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Yes. Yes, that's fine. Yes, no problem at all.

MR. WHITMAN: Very good.

Then, Lisa, I'll let you go back to your question.

Q Sir, this is Lisa Burgess with Stars and Stripes. I wanted to know if you could tell us a little something about the oil situation in your AOR. Do you find many attempts at sabotage at the operations there?

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Let me just confirm, you can hear me on the ordinary microphone; I don't need to use the telephone, do I?

MR. WHITMAN: You do not. We hear you just fine.

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Okay, I'll put that down.

AUDIO BREAK

BRIEFING RESUMES

MR. WHITMAN: General, are you there?

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Yes, I'm here. I can hear you.

MR. WHITMAN: It appears as if that telephone might have been a vital link to us. When you put it down to answer the question on oil, we lost you at that point.

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Okay. (Inaudible.) Do you want me to answer that question again rather more succinctly on the telephone?

(Laughter.)

MR. WHITMAN: Very good. We're sure it was a very insightful answer, but we did not catch it.

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Okay. Well, the answer to the question was that there has been very little attacking of the oil infrastructure down here in the south of Iraq. The locals are very conscious of the fact that the entire wealth of Iraq, and indeed, most of its future prosperity, is contained beneath the surface of the desert here in the south. And they are keen to it; 99.5 percent of them are keen to ensure that there is no damage to the oil infrastructure. I am always mindful of that remaining .5 percent who may wish to damage it for a variety of reasons, and it is well protected, both on land and at sea by naval force at the oil platforms where the large tankers load up with oil to export it.

The final point I made was that I do feel a vested interest in protecting the oil infrastructure of southern Iraq because in a previous appointment as commander of -- (word inaudible) -- Commando Brigade two-and-a-half years ago, it was the task of my brigade, under command of the First Marine Expeditionary Force, to seize the oil infrastructure on the al-Faw peninsula before it could be destroyed. So, as I say, I feel I have an interest in its long life.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General.

Q Yes, General, this is Vince Crawley with the Army Times newspapers. I have a couple of questions. First, you discussed the local Iraqi forces. Do you have a sense of how many of them are capable of independent operations at this point? And also, you discussed the Iranian border, but do you have a sense of how porous the Kuwaiti and Saudi borders are to unknown traffic?

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Yes. Let me talk about the forces and, of course, the answer to your question is not a simple one because it depends which elements of the security forces. I would say at the top of tree, without doubt, is the Iraqi army, which, as I said in my opening introduction, is about 5,500 at the moment rising to 9,000 by June next year. They are certainly becoming well trained. There is work to be done, but that work is progressing quickly. Some of the battalions, as you can tell from those figures, have not yet been raised.

There is, of course, in the south, as in common with the rest of Iraq, no shortage of volunteers to join the army; quite the opposite. We have run a very successful staff and command training course for about two -- for two weeks in the middle of last month in which we had 44 of the most senior officers, the divisional commander General Latif, his four brigade commanders and their senior staff, which was an extremely successful event, and

they gained a lot from that.

So are they ready yet to completely take over? The answer is no, but they're heading in the right direction.

The police force. There are 25,000 police in my AO, of which only about 14,500 thousand are trained; that is 58 percent. Now, all the police service, as you all know, are receiving either basic recruit training, or, if they were policemen under the old regime, they're going through something called the Transitional Integration Program. That is progressing well. The -- so basic training takes place in either Baghdad or in Jordan. And currently, we've got nearly 400 policemen from the south at the Jordan academy. The course last eight weeks, and I've been to see it, and it is an impressive organization.

The Department of Border Enforcement is yet one more down -- step down the tree, as it were. Seven thousand in total, and they consist of border police, customs police, immigration officials and, down here, the Coast Guard and Inland Waterways Departments. They are undermanned, under-funded, and although extremely keen, and many of them of course are ex-military. And down here, they have a particularly good commander, a brigadier who used to be an army officer. So, again, we're working hard on the Department of Border Enforcement in order to bring them up to spec.

There are a number of other security organizations for facilities protection: the Oil Protection Force, the Electricity (sic) and Power Security Service. Again, we do what we can with them, but resources are limited and we can't do as much as we or they would like. So I would say we are progressing well in all areas, especially well with the army. But there is still some way to go.

Now, your second question related to Iran again, but having answered the first one, I've forgotten the second one. Could you just repeat it for me?

Q It had to do with the borders, Saudi and Kuwaiti borders. How porous --

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Yes. Well, as I said in my introduction, we've got a lot of Saudi border and a lot of Kuwaiti border. The Saudi border in particular is one we pay attention to, as indeed do the Saudis from their side. We have, over the past (month ?) been reinforced by 26 MEU, 2,6 MEU from the U.S. Marine Corps, who came ashore for a period of four weeks to assist in monitoring the Saudi border. And that was a successful deployment.

The Kuwaiti border is benign. Of course, there is no problem that I'm aware of, of any illegal traffic across that border. Certainly not any terrorist-related illegal traffic. You will be aware of a recent border dispute in the Umm Qasr area, which is being resolved politically and diplomatically by the Iraqis, which again, I think, is a good sign, because this does show that the political and diplomatic system between the two countries is now beginning to work.

MR. WHITMAN: See if we can wrap this up real quick. Jim and then Charlie, and we'll close.

Q General, this is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse again. An American journalist was kidnapped and assassinated in Basra this week. I was wondering if you have any information about any leads in that case. And also, my understanding is that one of the things that he had been warning about before his assassination was that the police force has been infiltrated by -- I believe it's by Muqtada Sadr's people. And so I was wondering if you could address that issue as well, whether you are --whether that is a problem, infiltration of extremists in the police force there.

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Well, I'm certainly aware of the articles he wrote, and he was for a short time

embedded with us before he went his own way and moved downtown into Basra.

In answer to the first bit of your question, I can't really comment on the ongoing investigation, which is being led by the Iraqi police and civil authorities and, my understanding is, very vigorously.

Of course we have been given -- giving consular assistance inasmuch

as we can, and the American authorities are also clearly involved in that. And this is an investigation in progress, and I think it would be unreasonable for me to comment on the many speculative suggestions as to why he may have been killed.

In terms of the quality of the police, I think it's widely understood that the police from the former regime need retraining, and their own police leaders have not been slow to tell us that there are certainly rogue elements who have other interests than the good of the local citizens at heart.

What we are trying to do by fully engaging with the police and their training is to overcome that and to build up a corps of good policemen who can then oust the less good ones. And we're trying very hard to do that. We're placing considerable emphasis on human rights training at all levels, to redress the problems that were inherited from the previous regime. Human rights is included in all the training courses I mentioned, and, indeed, in the basic and advanced management courses. We teach human rights doctrine, democratic policing principles, ethics, modern policing techniques. Our hope is that we will have, as I say, a sufficient core of policemen who will have been well trained and whose interests are those of Iraq as a whole, who will be able to gradually take over the police force.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay, let's make this the last one, Charlie.

Q General, Charlie Aldinger again with Reuters. Of the 13,000 troops in your multinational division, how many are British? In other words, how many British troops are in Iraq? And has there been any discussion, since your area is fairly benign, of moving any British or other troops in your division up into the Sunni Triangle to help out with the difficulties up there?

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Of the 13,000, 7,920, to be precise. There are just under 8,000 are British. The next-largest contingent is the Italians, who provide very nearly 3,000, and then the other countries, varying numbers, from two up to 600.

The second part of your question. You're probably aware that there was a move from MND Southeast just before the end of last year to assist in blocking the exits from the Fallujah operation. So Britain has been prepared under certain circumstances to move troops out of the AO. At the moment there is no suggestion that we would do so again, nor have there been any requests made to do so. We have now been in command of this multinational division since 2003, when we first came here, and the intention is to stay in command of MND Southeast. I am not aware of any higher-level military or political suggestion that we should move outside of this area.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, your patience has been impressive as we have worked through these technical difficulties. You've given us more than twice the amount of time that we asked you for. This has been very insightful for us. We do appreciate it very much. And again, we hope to perhaps have you back here at a later date also.

MAJ. GEN. DUTTON: Great. Well, thank you very much. I look forward to it in future.

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